

## AESTHETIC ANALYSIS OF AHMADU AGYO'S EPHEMERAL PAINTINGS

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### Abstract

A good number of historical art scholars in recent times have dwelled on the documentation of the works of artists from the earliest times in modern Nigerian art. Details ranging from their stylistic contributions to other exceptional artistic attributes of their art have been projected by these scholars. Some of them have popular art schools as their pedigree, while others are self-trained. A good number of them have received the attention of the art historians because of their geographical placements. However, some have either been forgotten or not noticed at all for documentation. Alhaji Ahmadu Agyo is a self-trained artist whose art audience are commuters that pass through Nassarawa State. His large concrete canvas has served as a matrix for several painting and socio-political commentaries. What makes his art stand out, is its ephemerality: he wipes them off after a few days of their existence to make room for new ones. This paper documents the background of the artist, his work experience and goes further to analyze some of his works.

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**Key Words:** Ephemeral art, Ahmadu Agyo, Self-trained Artist, Concrete, Canvas

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### Introduction

Nigeria is one of the African countries that have made considerable impact in the art of the continent. Her modern art is expressed in various forms, such as painting, sculpture, textiles, ceramics, architecture and stage designs. In modern Nigeria, many artists have expressed their inner emotions in visual forms and have played significant roles in the development of modern Nigerian art. Hence, the roles played by some pioneer artists like Aina Onabolu (1882-1963), Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972), and Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994) to mention but a few, cannot be over emphasized. Since then, the Nigerian art scene has continued to garner strength and growth in depth. This, according to Egonwa (1994), was made possible as a result of several foreign nationals that came to Africa in the early 1920s to 1950s and founded art schools at both secondary and tertiary levels of the educational system. Notable among the art schools established include Zaria Art School (1953), Nsukka Art School (1960) and Ife Art School (1966). With the development of such schools of art, several styles and techniques have evolved in Africa, particularly, Nigeria.

Different subject-matters with contemporary relevance and artistic styles, the use of both conventional and unconventional media in varied styles, continue to feature in the art scene. The choice of media and their presentation also call for attention as regards permanence and ephemerality. For instance, Coleman (2006), comments that hairstyling and hairdressing have great cultural significance in Africa. Coiffures have been regarded as indicative of ethnic origin, gender, phase of life, as well as simple fashion; and have been related to power, age, religion, and politics. The transitory, yet highly visible nature of hair styles ensures its suitability as a medium for personal and social expression. It is not just the domain of women; elaborate hair styling for men can be an equally important indicator of their place in society. Hairstyling for wedding most times present an interesting opportunity for self-expression. The transitory nature of hair can be explored also in relation to beards, especially where men dress for specific occasions. In general, the use of ephemeral arts, as cultural arts, is created for a specific event or occasion. The various natural materials for ephemeral art such as, leaves, grasses, soft stones, wood, sand, clay, ice and snow are determined by seasons and weather.

### Background

Nassarawa State, noted for its rocky scenery, conducive for tourism, is a gate way to the Eastern parts of Nigeria from the Northern region. It is made up of about 300 ethnic and cultural groups, each with a distinct heritage; leaving in peace and social harmony with one another. Dogara

(2008), opines that, the accommodating nature of the state has led to a vibrant art practice (painting, ceramics, graphics, and sculpture), which also resulted in the display and sale of contemporary art works and other souvenirs to lovers of art in the state and beyond. Several young artists have therefore established studios and galleries of their own in Lafia, the state capital and other local government headquarters across the state. Through this means, they eke out a living and establish their mark in the art scene of the country. One of such artists is Ahmadu Agyo.

### **The Artist**

Ahmadu Agyo was born on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of April, 1942 in Arugba village, Shabu, Nassarawa State, Nigeria. Agyo proceeded to Katsina Alla, in Benue State for his secondary education, but could not graduate because of lack of funds. He dropped out from school in form three in 1963, and thereafter left for Kaduna that same year and joined the Nigerian Police Force (NPF). He served the NPF for seven years and retired in 1970. In an interview with Agyo in 2013, he states that:

When I was a little child, I drew and built a lot on the sand. My father labeled me a lazy boy, because of the sand castle that I built on footpaths, which will not allow me get to the farm on time. He had to send me away (to school) for that.

That, to Agyo, marked his evolution as an artist. While serving the NPF, he went fully into art production, designing and executing mural paintings for schools and hotels in Kaduna metropolis. Agyo's art gained recognition in 1970, when he presented two television programmes captioned, *Bakon Mu Na Mako* (Guest of the Week), and *Kai da Likitan Ka* (You and Your Doctor) free of charge to the then Broadcasting Company of Northern Nigeria (BCNN) now Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). He was later employed by BCNN in 1971 to work as a studio designer.

Ahmadu Agyo's ephemeral paintings were inspired by the studio designs that he created for television programmes. Agyo (2015) explains that, every television programme has its own backdrop design to suit a particular topic to be discussed. For this nature of engagement, works did not last for a long period in the studio, as there were unique designs for each programme to be recorded and different backdrops were needed for each. Agyo resigned his appointment from NTA in 1978 to become a politician. In 1979 he contested the then Plateau State governorship position under the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and lost in the primaries. Agyo has since then returned to his country home in Nassarawa Eggon, headquarters of Nassarawa Eggon the Local Government Area of Nassarawa State.

Agyo has been practicing ephemeral art since 1971, and over this period has produced many ephemeral works in paintings on his permanent 600cm x 240cm constructed wall outside his studio. His works have become common sight on the highway of Nassarawa Eggon- Lafia route in the north central part of Nigeria. His works offer travelers and passers-by on this route, a delightful diversion from the monotony of road traveling. Agyo's studio is located in the outskirt of Nassarawa Eggon, along Lafia road, opposite Eggon Community Secondary School, Nassarawa Eggon. The artist has created over 100 ephemeral paintings and also participated in an art exhibition during the World Black Festival of Arts and Culture, (FESTAC '77), held in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977.

### **Ephemeral Art**

Dictionary.com defines ephemeral as something lasting a very short time; short-lived; transitory, such as the ephemeral joys of childhood. From this definition, ephemeral art refers to art works that are created to exist for a brief period of time leaving no permanent trace. This involves art works that decay or disappear over a short period of time. Cavaniglia (2013), states that ephemeral art is connected to immediacy and change. As such, it has the ability to generate more dynamic and relevant responses to the site than a permanent work, which, as seen in some monuments and commemorative statues become invisible, through its ability to keep up with the changing face of the society. Cuomo (2013), avers that the importance of viewing ephemeral art works is therefore increased because it will not be around forever. Photography often plays a crucial role in these works because they can be documented and shared with future generations just as Agyo's works have been photographed.

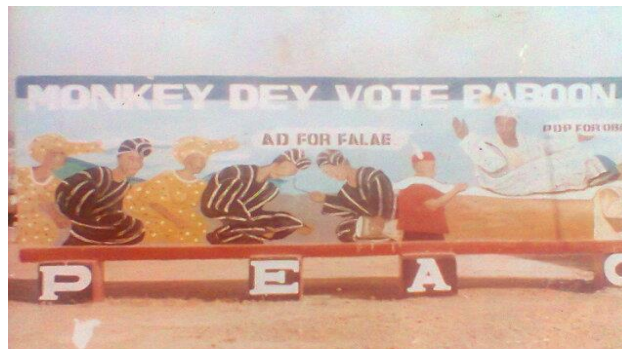
Artists, working in many different artistic styles have adopted ephemeral art to suit their specific artistic goals. Early land art and sand sculptures, installation art and chalk drawing on

footpaths are examples of ephemeral art. O'Neil, (2007), observes that, ephemeral art is that art that is usually understood as reflecting a desire to dematerialize the art object in order to evade the challenge of art museums. In many ephemeral art works, the author continues, something much more fundamental is involved. The different physical state of ephemeral works represents a shift from the art object to communication in art.

The traditional arts are sometimes known as ephemeral arts; art which is temporary or short-lived, based on a specific occasion or events and are transitory in nature. The first of these interfaces are masks. People use masks to acquire new identities or to hide one's face. Sometimes, the only mask that a person has is his face. It is within the context of the diversity that ephemeral arts offer, that this paper examines the contents of ephemeral paintings executed by Ahmadu Agyo. This is due to its socio-cultural relevance to his immediate environment and its implication to the larger Nigerian society.

### **Analysis of selected works**

Agyo's ephemeral paintings are graphically rendered, using raw enamel primary colours. Many of these works have featured in his permanent 600cm 240cm concrete wall in his outdoor studio. A work lasts on this wall between 5-7 days, after which it is wiped off using white paint, and a new one executed. The following works by the artist are analyzed and discussed below. Since the paintings are ephemeral in nature, all photographs used in complementing the description of works, were gotten from the artist because of the peculiarity of their production.



**Plate I Title: Monkey de vote, Baboon de chop; Artist: Ahmadu Agyo; Year: 2002; Medium: Enamel on wall; Size: 600x240cm; Source: The Artist**

Agyo is inspired by a wide range of issues like politics, environment, culture, and health, among others. For instance, his painting titled *Monkey dey Vote Baboon dey Chop* (Plate I) is a busy painting, produced in 2002. The work shows seven human figures, which represent the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria (Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo). The Yoruba community in the painting is represented with five figures. Three of the figures are male, dressed in black and white stripe *adire* (Yoruba traditional attire). The other two figures are female and wearing yellow lace with elaborate head tie. The figures dressed in white and black stripe clothes, are dancing to music, being played by one of them, using the traditional talking drum. Above the head of the drummer is an inscription tagged, 'A.D FOR FALAE. An Igbo man in traditional Igbo costume is painted walking, away in a sorrowful mood. A sixth figure painted on the right side, with a white flowing gown, indicative of a Hausa man from the northern part of Nigeria has 'P.D.P FOR OBASANJO', inscribed around him. The inscription is indicating support for Obasanjo, by the north. At the base is written PEACE.

Artistically, the colour distribution in *Monkey dey Vote, Baboon dey Chop* is an exciting balance of blues for the sky and yellow ochre at the foreground. A good sense of movement is created, with the activities of the human figures at the lower section of the painting. As one observes the activities in the painting, rhythm is created through the inter-link of these figures which moving figure keeps one's eyes moving, from one point to another. The different tones of blue harmoniously blend at the upper portion of the work, depicting the love of the Almighty God upon his people.

The dancing figures of the Yoruba ethnic group, in the painting, indicate enjoyment of the dividends of democracy under Obasanjo's administration, despite his initial rejection by the Yoruba group in the 1999 general elections. The Hausa and Igbo ethnic groups, who appear frustrated in the painting, who were earlier persuaded to bring Obasanjo to power, are yet to

get the dividends of democracy in their regions. In this work, the artist termed the Igbo and Hausa, as the *Monkey*, who vote while the Yoruba are shown, as the *Baboons* that “chop”. Despite this disparity, the art work appeals to the Hausa, Igbo and other ethnic groups in Nigeria, to be patient and remain peaceful. The painting was inspired by the political activities of pre-1999 elections and the post-election government of Olusegun Obasanjo, between 1999 and 2007. In this respect, the artist has documented a reality of his time and place.



**Plate II Title: Not a Do or Die; Artist: Ahmadu Agyo; Year: 2007; Medium: Enamel on wall; Size: 600x 240cm; Source: The Artist.**

*Not a Do or Die* (plate II) is a painting produced in 2007. The work is created in enamel on the same concrete wall. The painting depicts two categories of people, casting their votes on election day. The figure on the left hand side is seen casting his vote into a ballot box, using a gun. The other figure by the right hand side is seen, casting his vote, using a ballot paper. The work carries an inscription: “YOU CANNOT WIN ELECTION WITH GUN, ONLY BY BALLOT PAPER”. The figure on the left is marked X, while the other one is marked good, using a red pigment. The boxes are coated in green and white, to symbolize the Nigeria flag. The two figures are portrayed in white, against a light blue background. The figure on the left hand side, that is using a gun to cast his vote, represents people who choose to win elections through violence, while the one on the right preaches peace during and after elections. The inscription at the top is written against a red background that is suggestive of the violence that some politicians unleash when they want to win election at all costs. The use of cool colours suggests the activities of the peacemakers, during and after elections, as explained by the artist.

Ahmadu Agyo presents this philosophical painting, to address certain political ills. The masses of the country are largely poor, which is one of the reasons why the politicians use them to cause fracas, during elections for a paltry sum of money. Unfortunately, many die with their dreams unfulfilled, as a result of their attempt to procure votes for their bosses. Agyo (2013) compares his time with the present crop of politicians and concludes that, between the 1970s and 1980s, elections were conducted peacefully, without kidnapping, assassination, and rigging of elections, but today, the reverse is the case. The work under discussion, appeals to the viewer psychologically, politically, socially, and emotionally, and is capable of causing positive change in the society. It is to be noted that Agyo drew inspiration for this painting from his experience as an active politician before his retirement from politics.



**Plate III Title: AIDS; Artist: Ahmadu Agyo; Year: 2003; Medium: Enamel on wall; Size: 600x 240cm; Source: The Artist**

The Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a pandemic which at present is active and spreading fast. It is taking many lives daily in Nigeria and the world over. The painting titled "AIDS", (Plate III) was produced in 2003, with enamel on the artist's consistent concrete wall. The work depicts four figures against a yellow background. The inscriptions on the work read thus: "AIDS IS A SILENCE (sic) 3<sup>RD</sup> WORLD WAR: THEREFORE STICK TO YOUR WIFE AND HUSBAND". Two female figures are captured with their hands on their heads. The word 'GOING' as used by the auctioneer is inscribed across the first plump female figure. Another female figure which appears to be the same has 'GOING' written on her. Two male figures are seen with white flowing gowns and a cap carrying a casket on their shoulders. 'GONE' is written underneath the casket. The first two female figures, according to the artist, are the same person infected with HIV/AIDS. The painting shows different levels of AIDS which eventually lead to death. The first figure by the right is painted to have been infected with AIDS. The second figure in the painting has full blown AIDS, which one of its symptoms is emaciation, as the figure is painted. The infected victim is finally dead, as two men are shown conveying the corpse to the burial ground.

The inspiration for this work in 2003, according to Agyo, was, when the National Action Committee on AIDS (NACA), classified Nassarawa State, as second, next to Benue State, in the rate of HIV/AIDS infection in the country. The work was executed, to enlighten the youths and the populace, on the dangers of the dreaded disease, which is claiming many lives daily in Nigeria. The artist has through this painting, educated the public that AIDS is real and the public should be very careful, of its prevalence. The message concludes that, everyone should stick to his or her partner, which is the only way the disease will be eradicated in Nassarawa state and the country at large.





**Plate IV Title: *The Electorates*; Artist: Ahmadu Agyo; Year: 2010; Medium: Enamel on wall; Size: 600x 240cm; Source: The Artist.**

The *Electorates* (plate IV) is another painting executed in 2010. The work shows a tale of two communities, one, a village and the other, a city. The painting also shows two roads in between the two communities. The roads are characterized by two different standards.

The city community is shown with good road networks, while the village, scene has a bad road situation. The village on the left is seen with beautiful thatched houses. At the foreground of the painting, is a pond with lots of dirt. Three female figures are seen struggling to get to the pond, perhaps, to fetch water, while one is already fetching her own. All the girls are painted wearing white clothes. There is a rough road, which passes through the village. On the other side of the art work, is a city scape, with beautiful houses, pipe borne water, and a good road running through the city.

The arrow pointing at these two communities is systematically portrayed in white, to dissect the green at the lower part of the work thereby, creating a green white green composition, which again symbolizes Nigeria. The depiction of the village setting here, symbolizes the rural dwellers that are promised better lives by politicians, when they are campaigning. At the end of the elections, the politicians retire to their beautiful homes in the city and never come back to the electorates again until another election. The pond is full of dirt, but it is from it, the villagers drink, and the villagers have a bad road and no sign of electricity. On the other hand, the elected politicians enjoy all the social amenities that the country's wealth can provide, at the expense of the electorates. Not many electorates who worked and voted conscientiously, are happy to see some of their mediocre politicians convert funds, meant for constituency development, to their personal use, buying exotic cars, building houses everywhere including overseas.

Consciously or unconsciously, Ahmadu Agyo presents the viewer with the reality of what the politicians represent, which is their endless greed and unpatriotic decisions against their electorates. The painting, "The Electorates" is in a way, a metaphor to the younger generation of leaders who claim to provide dividends of democracy to their electorates, if elected into office.

### **Conclusion**

Ahmadu Agyo is inspired by the socio-cultural and political activities that surround him and to some extent, the ones he has personally experienced. This inspiration is also guided by his philosophy of seeing human condition, or being responsible for the kind of society one sees. Thus, his paintings are ephemeral, only because he chooses to make them so. This is to enable him express and also comment on societal happenings as frequently as he is motivated to do so, hence, he created the wall on which he regularly paints his subject matter. Consequently, he has painted several issues, which are, but not limited to politics, health, governance and the environment. These issues are indeed "reflective, emblematic, and generally representative of Agyo's time and place.

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